LANL closes road, trails for safety reasons; flooding and erosion control work under way

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Crews assessing damage and potential runoff effects of Las Conchas Fire

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico, July 8, 2011—Los Alamos National Laboratory today announced the closure of all publicly-accessible trails on Lab property as well as West Road, which leads from the Los Alamos town site into Los Alamos Canyon. The closure is in response to the increased fire risk and danger of flash flooding in these areas following damage to canyon headlands during the Las Conchas Fire.

"It's an effort to ensure people's safety and reduce the risk of injury and damage to property and sensitive natural and cultural resources," said Chris Cantwell, LANL's associate director for environment, safety, health, and quality.

Closure signs will be posted in coming days.

The Lab also cancelled all non-essential off-road work activity.

"As we often see after major wild land fires, vegetation is burned away and the soil can form a crust that repels water," Cantwell said. "That means water just rushes downhill with very little to stop it and that can cause flash flooding."

Only one acre burned on Lab property, but two major canyons above the Lab suffered damage. Meanwhile, Lab crews have already begun installing additional storm water controls and monitoring systems in canyon bottoms where trace Cold War-era contamination may be present. The controls, along with the massive Pajarito flood control structure and other measures taken since the 2000 Cerro Grande Fire, are aimed at slowing the ability of sediments to move down canyon.

Over the past two years, crews have installed earth berms, rock dams, and other controls to divert water away from more than 400 Cold War-era sites. Investigation or cleanup of those areas is taking place under the Consent Order, a 2005 agreement between the Department of Energy, LANL, and the state of New Mexico.

Three key LANL storm water gauges that support Santa Fe's public water utility suffered no damage in the fire. The gauges connect wirelessly to the utility's control room, allowing operators to stop diverting Rio Grande water if they choose. The gauges also take water samples at pre-set intervals during a flood.